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Committees
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Families and Human Services VC
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The Jacobs Report

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GAY CIVIL RIGHTS BATTLE HEATS UP

Before a standing room only audience in the Legislature's largest committee room last week, the House Committee on Family and Children's Services took the first step in adding a prohibition on same-sex-marriages and civil unions to the Michigan Constitution.

Amid a tense atmosphere between the religious right and supporters of gay rights, the committee acted quickly and without much deliberation in sending the joint resolution to the full House for further consideration. Committee Chair Loren Hager (R-Port Huron) placed a strict two-minute limit on those wishing to testify, and at one point summoned the House sergeants to remove a man who began shouting his opposition to the proposal.

All six Republicans on the GOP-dominated panel supported the measure while all three Democrats abstained. In a blow to gay rights advocates, not one member voted against it. Except for Rep. Doug Hart (R-Rockford), committee members were reluctant to discuss the politically volatile issue, and none gave a clear-cut statement on why they support it.

In eliminating the opportunity for civil unions, the resolution would place Michigan on a level of legal restriction not approached by other states. "It seems that the resolution might be reaching a bit too far," said Rep. Hart. "You have to be humane for heaven's sakes."

A gay Ypsilanti resident testified in support of the three adopted sons he has with his partner, describing the changes for the better his children have experienced since being removed from troubled families. The resolution would deprive him of his health benefits, which he receives through his partner's insurance, and directly threaten the well-being of his children.

The vote came on the same morning as President George W. Bush's announcement that he supports amending the U.S. Constitution to ban gay marriage because of situations in San Francisco and Massachusetts. One House Republican, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said that the push to hold a vote on the issue in Michigan is coming from the Bush White House.

"You can bet this amendment is a direct creation of the Bush White House," concurred political consultant Joe DiSano of Lansing-based Message Design Group. "It's designed to drive a wedge between Americans. The bottom line is this: if you can't win an election on jobs, the economy or health care, then go back to distracting people with fear and racism—or in this case, homophobia. That's what the GOP is doing. This resolution is just a gay version of Willie Horton."

Now the focus shifts to the full House, where 73 votes are needed to adopt the constitutional amendment. Opponents of the proposal say supporters lack the necessary votes. House Speaker Rick Johnson (R-LeRoy) said he expected a vote in about two weeks.

Rep. Lorence Wenke (R-Richland), one of the few Republicans opposed to the measure, was the target of flyers distributed by church members on Sunday.

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“I think the country generally engages in great mistreatment of homosexual men and women,” said Wenke, “and while I’m in Lansing, I do not intend to make it any more difficult for the parents of homosexuals or homosexuals themselves.”

Mr. Wenke spoke of his best friend growing up, a man who initially married a woman, but eventually realized he was gay. “I think the Republican Party is definitely missing the message that we ought to be sending to our homosexual brothers and sisters,” he said.

“I’m still waiting for someone to explain to me how this defends marriage,” said Rep. Leon Drolet (R-Clinton Twp).

If House Republicans produce 60 votes for the constitutional amendment, 13 Democrats would be needed to pass the measure onto the Senate. They have already lined up Reps. John Gleason (D-Flushing), Bill O’Neil (D-Allen Park) and Triette Lipsey Reeves (D-Detroit) for support.

The resolution faces tougher scrutiny in the Senate, should it make it that far.

“I will oppose the resolution,” said Senator Gilda Z. Jacobs (D-Huntington Woods). “Closing the door on future recognition for gay and lesbian families is wrong. Such families already exist—they are taxpaying citizens who are required to abide by the law of the land just like anyone else. To deny them traditional rights is not the way to “save” marriage. I don’t understand how disparaging other people’s families strengthens mine or yours. Allowing a majority to vote down the constitutional rights of a minority is not what makes this country unique and strong.”

Governor Jennifer Granholm agreed. “I believe that marriage is between a man and woman, but I don’t think it’s the state’s business to be in people’s bedrooms or in prohibiting people’s personal lifelong commitments,” she said. “We should be looking at ways to protect ALL of Michigan’s families, rather than looking for ways to undermine and divide them. All families should have the simple, basic right to pass their property on to whomever they choose or to visit sick family members in the hospital or to make basic medical decisions about their loved ones and businesses should be able to offer benefits to all families without interference from the state. There is so much critical work that we must be united on—good jobs for all of our citizens, affordable health care for all of our citizens, good education for all of our citizens—that we can not afford to allow our attention to be diverted by these divisive wedge issues.”

MICHIGAN JOB DISADVANTAGE: POOR HEALTH

A sneak-peak of a study commissioned by the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC) to examine the impact of the state’s health on its economic competitiveness reveal that Michigan ranks second among 17 “peer states” in obesity and diabetes, and first in deaths from coronary heart disease. The culprits: smoking, sedentary lifestyles and poor diet.

Officials said that businesses are aware of Michigan’s poor health habits and take their impact on health care costs into consideration when determining where to locate. According to the MEDC, it costs companies an extra \$1,500 a year to cover health care costs associated with employees who smoke too much, are overweight, or who are more susceptible to heart disease and diabetes.

The Big Three automakers claim that they add an extra \$1,200 to the price of every new car to cover health care costs for their employees owning unhealthy lifestyles.

The study, conducted through the University of Michigan, used Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, Washington and Wisconsin as benchmark states to which Michigan was compared.

ABSTINENCE BILLS OPPOSED BY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

The Department of Education testified this week that they have serious concerns over a pair of bills that lay out a fresh new list of sex education rules, all of which are geared toward telling kids not to have sex until marriage.

The department testified at the Senate Education Committee that its sex education program is working well and that

the strict rules in SBs 943 and 944 would not allow school districts to give students “the whole lifelong” picture of sex ed they need.

The rules also don’t give the department the flexibility they need to reach kids that are beyond the abstinence message.

The proposal would require schools that teach sex education to instruct their students under the pretext that “abstinence from sexual intercourse is the expected behavioral norm for unmarried people.” The proposal also demands that only a parent may chair a local school district’s sexual education commission, regardless of their ability to devote proper attention and knowledge to the technical requirements of holding the post.

The department also questioned whether SB 943 was sending a “mixed message” to students when it requires teachers to tell students that adoption is a positive and healthy outcome for teenage mothers and their children. Without addressing any stage of reality between abstinence and adoption, the politically charged language assumes that adoption is a positive and healthy outcome for all teenage mothers. Initially, the school is required to instruct against having sex, then it is required to make a sudden leap to promoting adoption, without addressing anything that happens in between.

Committee Chair Sen. Wayne Kuipers (R-Holland) held over an hour of testimony on the subject, hearing from high school leaders of abstinence clubs and folks arguing that sex education needs to prepare children for their entire lives, not just before adulthood.

“These bills aren’t based in reality,” said Senator Gilda Jacobs. “They ignore scientific consensus and encourage parents to bury their heads in the sand when it comes to teenage sex. Abstinence is part of the educational equation, but certainly not the entire message. We have to give teenagers the tools to be responsible with sex. Hoping that they’ll just say no leaves them exposed to misinformation leading to trouble.”

Planned Parenthood, the Oakland School district, the small and rural schools association and the school nurses association oppose the bills.

GRANHOLM SIGNS HOLOCAUST BILL

A bill establishing a Holocaust Remembrance Day in Michigan was signed on Thursday by Governor Jennifer Granholm. This year, the date is April 18, which is calculated on the 27th day of Nisan in the Hebrew calendar.

The date coincides with a key date in the Holocaust: April 19, 1943, which marked the beginning of a 27-day period when Jews in the Warsaw ghetto resisted deportation to Nazi death camps. The Holocaust, which took an estimated 6 million lives, lasted from 1933 to 1945.

State Senator Gilda Jacobs represents the 14th Senate District, which includes Beverly Hills, Bingham Farms, Farmington, Farmington Hills, Ferndale, Franklin, Hazel Park, Huntington Woods, Lathrup Village, Oak Park, Pleasant Ridge, Royal Oak Township, Southfield, and Southfield Township. She is the Minority Vice Chair of the Families & Human Services Committee and the Economic Development, Small Business & Regulatory Reform Committee. She also serves on the Government Operations and Health Policy Committees.

Constituents of the 14th District may contact Senator Jacobs at sengjacobs@senate.michigan.gov or toll-free at 1-888-937-4453.

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